SŪRAH 72

Al-Jinn

(The Jinn)

Prologue

This *sūrah* presents us with something very clear even before we look at any of the specific ideas it tackles. It is a symphony ringing out clear, strong beats coupled with an air of calm sadness and reflective sorrow. Consistent with this phenomenon are the images and scenes the *sūrah* portrays and the inspiring statements it includes, particularly in its last passage after the *jinn* concluded their discourse. In this last part, the *sūrah* addresses the Prophet in a way that fills the listener with much sympathy. He is commanded to declare that he looks for nothing in respect of his message other than delivering it, and that he is closely watched by God as he goes about this task: "*Say: 'I invoke my Lord alone, and I associate no partners with Him.' Say: 'It is not in my power to cause you harm or to set you on the right course.' Say: 'No one can ever protect me from God, nor can I ever find a place to hide from Him. My task is only to deliver what I receive from God and His messages.' Whoever disobeys God and His Messenger will have the fire of hell, where they will abide for ever. When they see what they have been promised, they will realize who has the lesser help and is smaller in number. Say: 'I do not know whether that which you have been promised is imminent, or whether my Lord has set for it a distant term. He alone knows that which is beyond the reach of human perception, and He does not disclose His secrets to anyone except to*

a messenger whom He has been pleased to choose. He then sends watchers to walk before and behind him, to know that they have delivered their Lord's messages. He has full knowledge of all they have. He takes count of everything.' (Verses 20–28)

In addition, the *sūrah* delivers a special and psychological effect in its lucid presentation of what the *jinn* said and the truth included in their account. This truth is of great significance, inviting much reflection and contemplation. It also suits the sad overtone evident in the *sūrah*'s rhythm. It only needs to be read rather slowly to impart the feeling we have just outlined.

Support from Another World

The *sūrah* presents a testimony to the truth of many aspects of the divine faith from a different world, a world beyond that of man. These aspects were the subject of much argument by the unbelievers who either denied them or who arrived at assumptions lacking any supporting evidence. The unbelievers in Makkah sometimes alleged that Muḥammad (peace be upon him) was in contact with the *jinn* who taught him what to say about faith. Now, a group of the *jinn* give their testimony, stating that they did not know anything about the Qur'ān until they listened to Muḥammad (peace be upon him) reciting it, and that they were then overwhelmed by its powerful truth. In fact, its effect on them was so profound that they could not remain silent. They had to speak in detail about what they had heard and felt. Their discourse reflects their total amazement at this great event with its lasting effects on the heavens, the earth, humans, *jinn*, angels and stars. Indeed, its effects cover the entire universe. Their testimony undoubtedly has a strong effect on man too.

Moreover, the *jinn*'s statement corrects many aspects of superstition upheld by those addressed by the *sūrah* for the first time, and by many other people across successive generations. It presents clear facts about this type of God's creatures, without any exaggeration. The Arabs who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān believed that the *jinn* exercised much power on earth. When an Arab found himself at night in a valley or an open plain, he would seek shelter with the *jinnee* of that

place, saying: "I seek shelter with the master of this valley against the designs of the wicked elements among his people." When he had said so, he could then sleep in peace. They also believed that the *jinn* had knowledge of *ghayb*, or what lies beyond the reach of human perception. They would give information to soothsayers who would then make predictions. Some Arabs worshipped the *jinn*, alleging that they were related to God. Some suggested that God had a wife from among the *jinn* and that she gave birth to angels.

Belief in the *jinn* on lines similar to these is widespread in all *jāhiliyyah* societies. Indeed, some legends and superstitions about them continue to be spread in different environments, even in the present day.

While such superstitions used to circulate widely, giving people different ideas and concepts about them, there were also other people who denied their existence altogether. They described any talk about the *jinn* as superstitious. Therefore, Islam sets the record straight. It confirms their existence and corrects wrong ideas about them, freeing people from the shackles of fear about the *jinn* and submission to their alleged authority.

The *jinn* do exist. They describe themselves in this *sūrah* in the following words: "*Some among us are righteous and others less so: we follow widely divergent paths.*" (Verse 11) Some go astray and lead people astray, while others are naïve and can easily be deceived: "*Some foolish ones among us have been saying some outrageous things about God. Yet we had thought that no man or* jinn *would ever utter a lie about God.*" (Verses 4–5) They are susceptible to divine guidance, able to listen to the Qur'ān, understand it and be affected by it: "*Say: It has been revealed to me that a group of the* jinn *listened in and then said: 'We have heard a wondrous discourse, giving guidance to what is sagacious, and we have come to believe in it. We shall never associate partners with our Lord.*" (Verses 1–2) By their nature, they can be punished, and the results of belief and unbelief can affect them: "*When we heard the guidance, we came to believe in it. Whoever believes in his Lord need never fear loss or injustice. Some of us submit to Him and others are unfair. Those who submit to God are the ones who have endeavoured to attain what is right. But those who are unfair will be the fuel of hellfire.*" (Verses 13–15) When humans appeal to them, they cannot benefit them; on the contrary,

they increase their affliction: "*True, in the past some among mankind sought refuge with some of the* jinn, *but they caused them further trouble.*" (Verse 6) They have no knowledge of the realm beyond their perception, and they no longer have any contact with heaven: "*We tried to reach heaven, but found it full of mighty guards and shooting stars. We used to take up positions there to listen, but whoever tries to listen now will find a shooting star in wait for him. We do not know if this bodes evil for those who live on earth, or if their Lord intends to guide them to what is right.*" (Verses 8–10) They have no relation to God Almighty: "*Sublimely exalted is the glory of our Lord! He has taken to Himself neither consort nor son.*" (Verse 3) They have no power to resist God's will: "*We know that we can never elude God on earth, and we can never elude Him by flight.*" (Verse 12)

We learn all this about the *jinn* from what is mentioned in this *sūrah*. Some of their other characteristics are mentioned elsewhere in the Qur'ān. For example, there is the reference to those of them who were made subservient to the Prophet Solomon. They did not know of his death until sometime after it occurred, which confirms that they have no knowledge of what is beyond their faculties of perception: "*When We decreed his death, nothing showed them that he was dead except an earthworm that gnawed away at his staff. And when he fell to the ground, the* jinn *saw clearly that, had they understood the reality which was beyond [their] perception, they would not have remained in humiliating servitude.*" (34: 14) The Qur'ān also refers to a quality of *Iblīs* and his folk. *Iblīs*, or Satan, belonged to the *jinn*, but he is devoted totally to evil, corruption and tempting others to do evil: "*Surely, he and his tribe watch you from where you cannot perceive them.*" (7: 27) This implies that the *jinn* have a form that humans cannot see, while they can see us. In addition, *Sūrah* 55, The Lord of Grace, states from which substances the *jinn* and human beings are created: "*He created man from dried clay, like pottery, and created the* jinn *from raging flames of fire.*" (55: 14–15) All this gives us a clear picture of this species that is concealed from us. It confirms its existence and gives us many of its characteristics. At the same time, it shows as false many of the ideas and superstitions people held about these creatures. It gives us a clear and accurate picture of them, one that is free of wild conjecture.

The *sūrah* corrects what the Arab unbelievers and other people used to say about the *jinn*, believing that they had exceptional powers and a large role to play in the universe. Others who have denied the existence of these creatures outright, mocking anyone who so believes, do not tell us the basis of their denial. Do they claim that they know every type of creature in the universe and cannot find the *jinn* among them? No scientist has ever made such a claim. The earth contains many species of creation which are discovered from time to time. No one claims that there will ever be an end to the discovery of new species.

Do they believe that they know all the powers at play in the universe and cannot find the *jinn* among them? No one can make such a claim. Every day, new powers are discovered, after having previously been unknown to man. Scientists try hard to know more of the powers and forces in the universe. They declare, in an attitude of humility, which their scientific discoveries have taught them, that they still stand at the edge of the unknown in the universe, and that they have hardly scraped the surface of it all.

Have they seen all the powers man utilizes and yet still cannot see the *jinn* among these? Not so. Since they managed to produce nuclear fission, scientists speak of the electron as scientific truth, yet none of them has seen an electron. They do not have in their laboratories a machine that can isolate an electron!

Why, then, are they so insistent on negating the very existence of this species of creature when man's information about the universe, its forces and dwellers is so scanty? Is it because so many superstitions have been weaved around the *jinn*? If so, the proper course of action is to show how such superstitions are false, just as the Qur'ān does. It is certainly not right to counteract it by denying their existence without having any proper evidence to support such a claim. Since this belongs to the realm that lies beyond the reach of our own perceptive faculties, we should refer to the only source from which we have accurate and confirmed information. This source cannot be contradicted by preconceived ideas. What this source tells us is final.

The *Jinn*'s Account

This *sūrah* contributes significantly to the formulation of the Islamic concept of the truth of the Godhead and servitude to Him, as well as the truth of the universe, the creatures living in it and their interrelations.

In the *jinn*'s account we have confirmation of God's oneness, a negation of His having a spouse or a son, affirmation of reckoning and requital in the life to come, and the fact that no creature can ever escape God anywhere in the universe. All will receive their fair dues. Some of the facts clearly stated by the *jinn* are then repeated in the part of the *sūrah* that addresses the Prophet: "*Say: 'I invoke my Lord alone, and I associate no partners with Him.'*" (Verse 20) "*Say: No one can ever protect me from God, nor can I ever find a place to hide from Him.*" (Verse 22)

The *jinn*'s account asserts that Godhead belongs only to God, and that servitude to Him is the highest status people can attain: "*Yet when God's servant stood up to pray to Him, they pressed in on him in multitude.*" (Verse 19) The *sūrah* confirms this truth in its address to the Prophet: "*Say: It is not in my power to cause you harm or to set you on the right course.*" (Verse 21) The world beyond our perception belongs totally to God alone, and the *jinn* know nothing about it: "*We do not know if this bodes evil for those who live on earth, or if their Lord intends to guide them to what is right.*" (Verse 10) It is also unknown to God's messengers, apart from what God, in His infinite wisdom, chooses to inform them of: "*Say: I do not know whether that which you have been promised is imminent, or whether my Lord has set for it a distant term. He alone knows that which is beyond the reach of human perception, and He does not disclose His secrets to anyone except to a messenger whom He has been pleased to choose. He then sends watchers to walk before and behind him.*" (Verses 25–27)

We learn from this *sūrah* that some interaction may take place between different types of creatures even though they may have totally different natures and constitutions. An example of such interaction is what happens between man and the *jinn*, as mentioned in this *sūrah* as elsewhere in the Qur'ān. Even in his abode on earth, man is not isolated from other creation. He may have some interaction with them. The isolation man

feels, as a species or a community or an individual, does not apply to the nature of the universe. This idea should broaden man's feelings towards the universe and the creatures, forces and secrets it contains. Man may not be aware of these, but they exist in the world around him. He is not the only dweller in the universe as he sometimes imagines.

Moreover, there is a definite causal relation between people's following the right way and the operation of some forces in the universe, according to God's will and its effect on His creatures: "*Had they established themselves on the right way, We would have given them abundant water to drink, so as to test them by this means. Anyone who turns away from his Lord's revelation will be made to endure uphill suffering.*" (Verses 16–17) This is a truth that forms part of the Islamic concept of the interrelation between man, the universe and God's will.

As we see, the *sūrah* stretches with its inspiration over great areas and wide horizons, even though it consists of no more than 28 verses. Furthermore, it was revealed on a particular occasion to report on a certain event.

Reports of the Event

There are a number of different reports about the *jinn* listening to the Qur'ān. One quotes 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abbās as saying: "God's Messenger did not read the Qur'ān to the *jinn*, nor did he see them. What took place was that the Prophet and a group of his Companions once went to the 'Ukāẓ market place. The *jinn* had previously been barred from trying to reach heaven to eavesdrop and were struck by shooting stars. They went back to their people and told them what happened. They said: 'Something must have happened to prevent you from learning anything from heaven. Go in pursuit of information throughout the earth to find out what has happened. They went in groups, travelling east and west throughout the earth. The group that went to Tihamah drew close to the Prophet when he was in the Nakhlah Valley, going to 'Ukāẓ. He was leading his Companions in the *Fajr*, or Dawn, Prayer. They listened to him reciting the Qur'ān. When he finished his recitation, they said to each other: 'This is indeed what happened to cause you to be barred from learning news from on high.' They went back to their people and

told them: '*We have heard a wondrous discourse, giving guidance to what is sagacious, and we have come to believe in it. We shall never associate partners with our Lord.*' God then revealed the *sūrah*, The *Jinn*, to the Prophet speaking of this event." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

Another report mentions that 'Abdullāh ibn Mas'ūd gave the following answer to the question about whether any of the Prophet's Companions were present with him when he met the *jinn*: "None of us were present. However, we were with him one night when he went missing. We looked for him everywhere, in valleys and on the paths, but could not find him. Some of us thought that he might have been taken or even killed. That was our worst night. In the morning, we saw him coming to us from the direction of Ḥirā'. We said: 'Messenger of God! We missed you and looked for you everywhere but could not find you. We had such a bad night.' He said: 'A caller from the *jinn* came to me and so I went and read the Qur'ān to them.' He took us to the place and showed us their traces and the remains of the fires they lit. They asked him for food. He said: 'Every bone of an animal slaughtered under God's name will be in your hands full of meat; and all animal droppings will be wholesome feed for your animals.' The Prophet then said to us: 'Do not use these to wipe off your personal dirt, because they are food for your brethren'." [Related by Muslim.]

There is a third report also attributed to Ibn Mas'ūd, but the chain of transmission of the one we have quoted makes it more reliable. We will, therefore, leave this and similar reports aside. The two authentic reports we have quoted seem to be mutually contradictory. Ibn 'Abbās says that the Prophet did not know of the *jinn*'s presence when they listened to him reading the Qur'ān, while Ibn Mas'ūd says that they called upon the Prophet and he went with them. Al-Bayhaqī resolves this apparent contradiction by saying that the two reports speak of two different occasions, not just one.

A different report is given by Ibn Isḥāq in his biography of the Prophet. He says that after the death of Abū Ṭālib, the Prophet's uncle, the Quraysh were able to inflict more harm on him than they could ever do during his uncle's lifetime. Therefore, the Prophet went to Taif, seeking support from the Thaqīf, the major tribe living there. He went there alone, hoping to gain a positive response:

Once at Ṭā'if, the Prophet approached its leading personalities, explaining his message... For ten days the Prophet spoke to one of their chiefs after another. None gave him a word of encouragement. The worst response came from three brothers, the sons of 'Amr ibn 'Umayr. These three brothers, 'Abd Yalīl, Mas'ūd and Ḥabīb, were the recognized leaders of Ṭā'if. One of them was married to a Qurayshi woman and the Prophet hoped that this relationship would work in his favour. In the event the three men were extremely rude in their rejection of the Prophet's approach.

The first one said: "I would tear the robes off the Ka'bah if it was true that God has chosen you as His Messenger." The second said: "Has God found no one other than you to be His Messenger?" The third said: "By God, I will never speak to you. If it is true that you are God's Messenger, you are too great for me to speak to you. If, on the other hand, you are lying, you are not worth answering."

Fearing that the news of their rejection would serve to intensify the Quraysh's hostility to Islam, the Prophet requested the Thaqīf notables not to publicize his mission. They refused him even that. Instead they set on him a crowd of their teenagers and servants, who chased and stoned him. His feet were soon bleeding and he was in a very sorry state. Zayd tried hard to defend him and protect him from the stones. The Prophet then sought refuge in an orchard which belonged to two brothers from Makkah. They were in their orchard, and they saw Muḥammad when he entered. At first they watched him quietly, but he did not see them.

As the Prophet sat down, he said this highly emotional and touching prayer:

> To You, My Lord, I complain of my weakness, lack of support and the humiliation I am made to receive.
>
> Most compassionate and merciful! You are the Lord of the weak, and You are my Lord. To whom do You leave me? To a distant person who receives me with hostility? Or to an enemy to whom You have given power over me?
>
> If You are not displeased with me, I do not care what I face. I would, however, be much happier with Your mercy.

> I seek refuge in the light of Your face by which all darkness is dispelled and both this life and the life to come are put on their right courses against incurring Your wrath or being the subject of Your anger. To You I submit, until I earn Your pleasure. Everything is powerless without Your support.

The owners of the orchard were none other than 'Utbah and Shaybah, the two sons of Rabī'ah, who commanded positions of high esteem in the Quraysh. Although the two brothers were opposed to Islam and to Muḥammad, they felt sorry for him in his unenviable plight. Therefore, they called a servant of theirs, named 'Addās, and told him to take a bunch of grapes on a plate to Muḥammad. 'Addās, who was a Christian from the Iraqi town of Nineveh, complied.

As the Prophet took the grapes he said, as Muslims do before eating: 'In the name of God.' Surprised, 'Addās said: 'This is something no one in these areas says.' When 'Addās answered the Prophet's question about his religion and place of origin, the Prophet commented: 'Then you come from the same place as the noble, divine Jonah.' Even more surprised, 'Addās asked: 'How did you know about Jonah? When I left Nineveh, not even ten people knew anything about him.' The Prophet said: 'He was my brother. Like me, he was a prophet.' 'Addās then kissed the Prophet's head, hands and feet in a gesture of genuine love and respect. As they watched, one of the two owners of the orchard said to his brother: 'That man has certainly spoilt your slave.'

When 'Addās joined them they asked him the reason for his very respectful attitude to Muḥammad. He said: 'There can be no one on earth better than him. He has indeed told me something which no one but a Prophet would know.' They said: 'You should be careful, 'Addās. He may try to convert you while your religion is better than his.'[1]

1. Ibn Hishām, *Al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah*, Vol. II, pp. 60–63. Also, Ibn Sayyid al-Nās, *'Uyūn al-Athar*, pp. 231–233. Also, Adil Salahi (2002), *Muhammad: Man and Prophet*, Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, pp. 179–180.

Continuing this report, Ibn Isḥāq says: "When the Prophet despaired of receiving any good response in Ṭā'if, he returned to Makkah. When he was at Nakhlah, he stood up praying in the middle of the night. It was at this time that a group of the *jinn* – seven in number from the town of Naṣībīn [in northern Syria] as I was told – passed by and listened to him reading the Qur'ān. When he finished his prayer, they left hurriedly to warn their people. They believed in Islam and God told the Prophet of what happened: "*We sent to you a group of* jinn *to listen to the Qur'ān. When they heard it, they said to one another, 'Listen in silence!' When the recitation ended, they returned to their people to warn them. 'Our people,' they said, 'we have been listening to revelation bestowed from on high after Moses, confirming what came before it. It guides to the truth and to a straight path. Our people! Respond to God's call and have faith in Him. He will forgive you your sins and deliver you from grievous suffering.*" (46: 29–31) He also revealed *Sūrah* 72, The Jinn."

Ibn Kathīr has the following comment to make on this last report: "The event itself is true, but to say that it took place on that night is questionable. The *jinn*'s listening to the Qur'ān occurred during the early days of prophethood, as clearly indicated in the above-quoted *ḥadīth* of Ibn 'Abbās. On the other hand, the Prophet's trip to Ṭā'if occurred after his uncle's death, one or two years before his migration to Madīnah, as confirmed by Ibn Isḥāq and others."

If Ibn Isḥāq's report is true and this incident took place when the Prophet was on his way back from Ṭā'if, hurt by the arrogant response of the Thaqīf elders, and after he had expressed his passionate prayer appealing to God, his Lord and Protector, then it is most remarkable that God should have sent him those *jinn* and told him about what they said to their people. Moreover, it gives fine impressions of God's care.

At whichever time and place this event took place, it is certainly very significant in itself and in what the *jinn* had to say about the Qur'ān and Islam. We will now discuss its presentation in the *sūrah*.

Al-Jinn (The Jinn)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Say: It has been revealed to me that a group of the *jinn* listened in and then said: 'We have heard a wondrous discourse, (1)

قُلْ أُوحِيَ إِلَيَّ أَنَّهُ اسْتَمَعَ نَفَرٌ مِّنَ الْجِنِّ فَقَالُوا إِنَّا سَمِعْنَا قُرْآنًا عَجَبًا ﴿١﴾

giving guidance to what is sagacious, and we have come to believe in it. We shall never associate partners with our Lord. (2)

يَهْدِي إِلَى الرُّشْدِ فَآمَنَّا بِهِ ۖ وَلَن نُّشْرِكَ بِرَبِّنَا أَحَدًا ﴿٢﴾

Sublimely exalted is the glory of our Lord! He has taken to Himself neither consort nor son. (3)

وَأَنَّهُ تَعَالَىٰ جَدُّ رَبِّنَا مَا اتَّخَذَ صَاحِبَةً وَلَا وَلَدًا ﴿٣﴾

Some foolish ones among us have been saying some outrageous things about God. (4)

وَأَنَّهُ كَانَ يَقُولُ سَفِيهُنَا عَلَى اللَّهِ شَطَطًا ﴿٤﴾

Yet we had thought that no man or *jinn* would ever utter a lie about God. (5)

وَأَنَّا ظَنَنَّا أَن لَّن تَقُولَ الْإِنسُ وَالْجِنُّ عَلَى اللَّهِ كَذِبًا ﴿٥﴾

True, in the past some among mankind sought refuge with some of the *jinn*, but they caused them further trouble. (6)

وَأَنَّهُ كَانَ رِجَالٌ مِّنَ الْإِنسِ يَعُوذُونَ بِرِجَالٍ مِّنَ الْجِنِّ فَزَادُوهُمْ رَهَقًا ﴿٦﴾

They thus came to think, just like you thought, that God will not raise anyone. (7)

وَأَنَّهُمْ ظَنُّوا كَمَا ظَنَنتُمْ أَن لَّن يَبْعَثَ
اللَّهُ أَحَدًا ﴿٧﴾

We tried to reach heaven, but found it full of mighty guards and shooting stars. (8)

وَأَنَّا لَمَسْنَا السَّمَاءَ فَوَجَدْنَاهَا مُلِئَتْ
حَرَسًا شَدِيدًا وَشُهُبًا ﴿٨﴾

We used to take up positions there to listen, but whoever tries to listen now will find a shooting star in wait for him. (9)

وَأَنَّا كُنَّا نَقْعُدُ مِنْهَا مَقَاعِدَ لِلسَّمْعِ ۖ فَمَن
يَسْتَمِعِ الْآنَ يَجِدْ لَهُ شِهَابًا رَّصَدًا ﴿٩﴾

We do not know if this bodes evil for those who live on earth, or if their Lord intends to guide them to what is right. (10)

وَأَنَّا لَا نَدْرِي أَشَرٌّ أُرِيدَ بِمَن فِي الْأَرْضِ
أَمْ أَرَادَ بِهِمْ رَبُّهُمْ رَشَدًا ﴿١٠﴾

Some among us are righteous and others less so: we follow widely divergent paths. (11)

وَأَنَّا مِنَّا الصَّالِحُونَ وَمِنَّا دُونَ ذَٰلِكَ ۖ
كُنَّا طَرَائِقَ قِدَدًا ﴿١١﴾

We know that we can never elude God on earth, and we can never elude Him by flight. (12)

وَأَنَّا ظَنَنَّا أَن لَّن نُّعْجِزَ اللَّهَ فِي الْأَرْضِ
وَلَن نُّعْجِزَهُ هَرَبًا ﴿١٢﴾

When we heard the guidance, we came to believe in it. Whoever believes in his Lord need never fear loss or injustice. (13)

وَأَنَّا لَمَّا سَمِعْنَا الْهُدَىٰ آمَنَّا بِهِ ۖ
فَمَن يُؤْمِن بِرَبِّهِ فَلَا يَخَافُ بَخْسًا
وَلَا رَهَقًا ﴿١٣﴾

Some of us submit to Him and others are unfair. Those who submit to God are the ones who have endeavoured to attain what is right. (14)

وَأَنَّا مِنَّا الْمُسْلِمُونَ وَمِنَّا الْقَاسِطُونَ ۖ
فَمَنْ أَسْلَمَ فَأُولَٰئِكَ تَحَرَّوْا رَشَدًا ﴿١٤﴾

But those who are unfair will be the fuel of hellfire. (15)

وَأَمَّا ٱلْقَٰسِطُونَ فَكَانُوا۟ لِجَهَنَّمَ حَطَبًا ﴿١٥﴾

Had they established themselves on the right way, We would have given them abundant water to drink, (16)

وَأَلَّوِ ٱسْتَقَٰمُوا۟ عَلَى ٱلطَّرِيقَةِ لَأَسْقَيْنَٰهُم مَّآءً غَدَقًا ﴿١٦﴾

so as to test them by this means. Anyone who turns away from his Lord's revelation will be made to endure uphill suffering. (17)

لِّنَفْتِنَهُمْ فِيهِ ۚ وَمَن يُعْرِضْ عَن ذِكْرِ رَبِّهِۦ يَسْلُكْهُ عَذَابًا صَعَدًا ﴿١٧﴾

Places of worship are for God alone; therefore, do not invoke anyone other than God. (18)

وَأَنَّ ٱلْمَسَٰجِدَ لِلَّهِ فَلَا تَدْعُوا۟ مَعَ ٱللَّهِ أَحَدًا ﴿١٨﴾

Yet when God's servant stood up to pray to Him, they pressed in on him in multitude. (19)

وَأَنَّهُۥ لَمَّا قَامَ عَبْدُ ٱللَّهِ يَدْعُوهُ كَادُوا۟ يَكُونُونَ عَلَيْهِ لِبَدًا ﴿١٩﴾

Say: 'I invoke my Lord alone, and I associate no partners with Him.' (20)

قُلْ إِنَّمَآ أَدْعُوا۟ رَبِّى وَلَآ أُشْرِكُ بِهِۦٓ أَحَدًا ﴿٢٠﴾

Say: 'It is not in my power to cause you harm or to set you on the right course.' (21)

قُلْ إِنِّى لَآ أَمْلِكُ لَكُمْ ضَرًّا وَلَا رَشَدًا ﴿٢١﴾

Say: 'No one can ever protect me from God, nor can I ever find a place to hide from Him. (22)

قُلْ إِنِّى لَن يُجِيرَنِى مِنَ ٱللَّهِ أَحَدٌ وَلَنْ أَجِدَ مِن دُونِهِۦ مُلْتَحَدًا ﴿٢٢﴾

My task is only to deliver what I receive from God and His messages.' Whoever disobeys God and His Messenger will have the fire of hell, where they will abide for ever. (23)

إِلَّا بَلَٰغًا مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ وَرِسَٰلَٰتِهِۦ ۚ وَمَن يَعْصِ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥ فَإِنَّ لَهُۥ نَارَ جَهَنَّمَ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَآ أَبَدًا ﴿٢٣﴾

When they see what they have been promised, they will realize who has the lesser help and is smaller in number. (24)

حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا رَأَوْا۟ مَا يُوعَدُونَ فَسَيَعْلَمُونَ مَنْ أَضْعَفُ نَاصِرًا وَأَقَلُّ عَدَدًا ﴿٢٤﴾

Say: 'I do not know whether that which you have been promised is imminent, or whether my Lord has set for it a distant term. (25)

قُلْ إِنْ أَدْرِىٓ أَقَرِيبٌ مَّا تُوعَدُونَ أَمْ يَجْعَلُ لَهُۥ رَبِّىٓ أَمَدًا ﴿٢٥﴾

He alone knows that which is beyond the reach of human perception, and He does not disclose His secrets to anyone (26)

عَٰلِمُ ٱلْغَيْبِ فَلَا يُظْهِرُ عَلَىٰ غَيْبِهِۦٓ أَحَدًا ﴿٢٦﴾

except to a messenger whom He has been pleased to choose. He then sends watchers to walk before and behind him, (27)

إِلَّا مَنِ ٱرْتَضَىٰ مِن رَّسُولٍ فَإِنَّهُۥ يَسْلُكُ مِنۢ بَيْنِ يَدَيْهِ وَمِنْ خَلْفِهِۦ رَصَدًا ﴿٢٧﴾

to know that they have delivered their Lord's messages. He has full knowledge of all they have. He takes count of everything.' (28)

لِّيَعْلَمَ أَن قَدْ أَبْلَغُوا۟ رِسَٰلَٰتِ رَبِّهِمْ وَأَحَاطَ بِمَا لَدَيْهِمْ وَأَحْصَىٰ كُلَّ شَىْءٍ عَدَدًا ﴿٢٨﴾

A Surprise for the *Jinn*

> *Say: It has been revealed to me that a group of the* jinn *listened in and then said: 'We have heard a wondrous discourse, giving guidance to what is sagacious, and we have come to believe in it. We shall never associate partners with our Lord. Sublimely exalted is the glory of our Lord! He has taken to Himself neither consort nor son. Some foolish ones among us have been saying some outrageous things about God. Yet we had thought that no man or* jinn *would ever utter a lie about God. True, in the past some among mankind sought refuge with some of the* jinn, *but they caused them further trouble. They thus came to think, just like you thought, that God will not raise anyone.'* (Verses 1–7)

The Arabic word *nafar*, used in the opening verse and translated here as 'a group', signifies a group of people between three and nine in number. Some reports suggest that they were seven.

This opening suggests that the Prophet learnt of the *jinn*'s listening to his recitation and what they did afterwards through revelation from on high. It is God who told him about that of which he had no knowledge. This might have been the first time, and there might have been one or more other occasions when the Prophet read out the Qur'ān to the *jinn*, as reported by Jābir in a *ḥadīth* that says: "God's Messenger read out *Sūrah* 55, The Lord of Grace, in full to his Companions. When he finished, they were silent. He said: 'I read this *sūrah* to the *jinn* and they gave a better response than you. Every time I read the repeated verse, '*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*' they said: 'None of Your blessings, our Lord, do we deny. All thanks are due to You'." [Related by al-Tirmidhī.] This report confirms the one by Ibn Mas'ūd mentioned in the Prologue.

The event mentioned in the present *sūrah* must be the same referred to in *Sūrah* 46, The Sand Dunes, which says: "*We sent to you a group of* jinn *to listen to the Qur'ān. When they heard it, they said to one another, 'Listen in silence!' When the recitation ended, they returned to their people to warn them. 'Our people,' they said, 'we have been listening to revelation bestowed from on high after Moses, confirming what came before it. It guides to the truth and to a straight path. 'Our people! Respond to God's call and have*

faith in Him. He will forgive you your sins and deliver you from grievous suffering. He who does not respond to God's call cannot elude Him on earth, nor will they have any protector against Him. They are indeed in manifest error.'" (Verses 29–32) These verses speak, as does the present *sūrah*, of the great surprise felt by the *jinn* when they first listened to the Qur'ān. It had such a great effect on their minds, hearts and feelings. They were filled with emotion, resulting in their travel in great haste to tell their people. Their report expresses such overflowing emotions. Indeed, it is stated in an exceptionally fluent, warm, charged and very happy style. The surprise for them was great and their reaction was only natural.

"*We have heard a wondrous discourse.*" (Verse 1) The first thing they realize about the Qur'ānic discourse is that it is unfamiliar, and that it makes the listener wonder. This is how the Qur'ān is received by anyone who listens with an open and positive mind. He will find that the Qur'ān contains intrinsic power, strong appeal and beautiful music that touch hearts and feelings. It is '*wondrous*' indeed, which tells us that the group of *jinn* listening to it had refined literary tastes.

"*Giving guidance to what is sagacious.*" (Verse 2) This is the second prominent feature of the Qur'ān which the *jinn* immediately felt within their hearts. That they use the word 'sagacious' to describe it is particularly significant. It is true that the Qur'ān guides to what is right and sensible, but the term 'sagacious' also connotes maturity and wisdom that distinguishes right from wrong. It adds an element of awareness that naturally guides to the truth and to what is right and good. It establishes a bond with the source of light and guidance, as well as harmony with major universal laws. In doing so, the Qur'ān guides to what is sagacious, as indeed it does by providing a code of living the like of which has never been experienced by any other human community. Yet this system enabled individuals and communities to attain sublime standards in personal morality and values as well as in social relations and interactions.

"*And we have come to believe in it.*" (Verse 2) This is the natural and sound reaction to listening to the Qur'ān and understanding its nature. The *sūrah* puts this response to the unbelievers in Makkah who used to listen to the Qur'ān but who would not believe in it. They even attributed it to the *jinn*, alleging that the Prophet was a soothsayer, a poet or a

madman, influenced by the *jinn*. Here, we see the *jinn* wondering at the Qur'ān, profoundly influenced by its discourse, unable to resist it. We see them able to discern the truth and submit to it: "*We have come to believe in it.*" They could not turn away from the truth they clearly felt.

"*We shall never associate partners with our Lord.*" (Verse 2) Theirs, then, is a case of complete faith, untainted by delusions, superstitions or any element of polytheism. It is faith based on understanding the truth presented by the Qur'ān, i.e. the truth of God's absolute oneness.

"*Sublimely exalted is the glory of our Lord! He has taken to Himself neither consort nor son.*" (Verse 3) The *sūrah* uses here the Arabic word *jadd*, attributing it to God. This word connotes share, position, authority and greatness. All these connotations are meant here. Hence the translation of the first sentence in the verse. What is intended here is to impart a clear feeling of God's greatness and His being far above taking a wife or child for Himself. The Arabs used to allege that the angels were God's daughters through a marriage to the *jinn*. Now the *jinn* deny such a superstition in a most expressive way. They glorify God and deny that such a notion could ever have happened. The *jinn* would have proudly proclaimed such a connection had there been any possibility of it ever having taken place. Their denial delivers a massive blow at the unbelievers' baseless claims, and indeed at every similar claim alleging that God has taken a son to Himself in any way, shape or form.

"*Some foolish ones among us have been saying some outrageous things about God. Yet we had thought that no man or* jinn *would ever utter a lie about God.*" (Verses 4–5) This is a critical examination of what the *jinn* used to hear some of the foolish among them say. Those are the ones who did not believe in God's oneness and who alleged that He had a wife, a son and partners. Now that they have heard the Qur'ān, they realize this is all absolutely false. Those who promote such ideas are, therefore, foolish, lacking sound mind. They explain their own earlier belief of what those foolish ones said by the fact that they could not imagine that any creature, human or *jinn*, would ever perpetrate a lie about God. To them, that was an absolute enormity. Therefore, when those foolish people told them that God had a wife, a son and partners, they believed them because they could not conceive of how anyone would knowingly utter an untruth about God. Indeed, their

perception of the enormity of lying about God is what qualified this group of *jinn* to immediately declare their belief when they listened to the Qur'ān. It shows that their hearts and minds were free of deviation. They had only fallen into error as a result of the trust they assumed in other people. When they heard the truth, they immediately realized it. They recognized it and submitted to it. They made their declaration definitive: "*We have heard a wondrous discourse, giving guidance to what is sagacious, and we have come to believe in it. We shall never associate partners with our Lord. Sublimely exalted is the glory of our Lord! He has taken to Himself neither consort nor son.*" (Verses 1–3)

This immediate and instinctive reaction to the truth should have been enough to awaken many of those who were deluded by the Quraysh elders and their claims that God had partners, or a wife and son. It should have made them more cautious about what they heard and alerted them to the need to examine what the Prophet Muḥammad said in a meaningful attempt to arrive at the truth. This should have been enough to shake the blind trust they placed in what those foolish Quraysh elders said to the contrary. This is what the *sūrah* intends by virtue of its effects. It is all intended as part of its long treatment of the lingering traces of *jāhiliyyah* in people's minds and thoughts, many of whom were simple but deluded by false claims and superstitions.

Between Humans and *Jinn*

"*True, in the past some among mankind sought refuge with some of the* jinn, *but they caused them further trouble.*" (Verse 6) Here, the *jinn* refer to what was widely accepted in pre-Islamic days in Arabian society, and which remains accepted in many other communities, claiming that the *jinn,* exercized power on the earth and against humans. Indeed, it was thought that they were able to bring about benefit and cause harm to people, and that they were in full control of certain areas of land, sea and air. Satan is given access to people's minds and hearts. Only those who seek protection with God are saved from him. Whoever listens to him is listening to his own worst enemy who will not bring him any benefit. On the contrary, he will increase his problems. This group of *jinn* report on what used to happen: "*True, in the past some among mankind*

to following guidance or error.[3] Hence, it is an aspect of God's grace that He has willed to help mankind by sending them messengers to promote goodness in their natures and to enhance their tendency to follow guidance. There are no grounds, then, for thinking that God would not be sending any messengers.

This is true when we take the verse to refer to sending God's messengers. If we take the reference to mean resurrection on the Day of Judgement, we say again that it is necessary for humans, since they do not finish their life's account in this present world. This is to fulfil a certain purpose of God's. It relates to the design He has chosen for the universe, yet we know nothing about this design. He has decreed that all will be resurrected to receive their accounts and resume life along the path their first life qualifies them for. Again, this leaves no room to suggest that God will not resurrect anyone. Such a suggestion is contrary to believing in God's wisdom and perfection.

This group of *jinn* presents the right belief directly to their people. Furthermore, the Qur'ān reports it to show the falsehood in the unbelievers' way of thinking.

Shooting Stars

Continuing to report on what they learnt about the last divine message and its echoes throughout the universe, the *jinn* disclaim any knowledge of the realm that lies beyond the reach of theirs and human perception. They disclaim having any role in it:

> *We tried to reach heaven, but found it full of mighty guards and shooting stars. We used to take up positions there to listen, but whoever tries to listen now will find a shooting star in wait for him. We do not know if this bodes evil for those who live on earth, or if their Lord intends to guide them to what is right.* (Verses 8–10)

3. We also learn from this *sūrah* that the *jinn* also have a dual nature, except for *Iblīs* or Satan who belonged to them but dedicated himself totally to evil. He was expelled from God's mercy and became totally evil with no room for goodness in him.

This suggests that in the period that preceded the revelation of God's final message, perhaps in between it and Jesus' message, the *jinn* used to try to reach up to heaven to eavesdrop on the angels and their discussion of their assignments with respect to the affairs of God's creatures on earth. They would impart such information to their human friends, the soothsayers and astrologers, to enable them to delude people. In accordance with Satan's plot, these soothsayers and astrologers would then use a small portion of the truth they so received and mix it with much falsehood, circulating it among people. This might have been the case when there was no messenger preaching the divine message on earth, in the intervening period between Jesus and Muḥammad (peace be upon them both). What form this took we do not know, because the Qur'ān has not given us any information about it. In any case, there is no need to explore it further because we accept it as the sum of this fact.

This group of *jinn* say that such eavesdropping, to which they refer by '*reaching up to heaven*', was no longer possible. When they tried it, they found the way blocked by mighty guards and shooting stars aimed at them, indeed killing them. They declare that they know nothing about the prospect determined for mankind: "*We do not know if this bodes evil for those who live on earth, or if their Lord intends to guide them to what is right.*" (Verse 10) They, thus, clearly declare that they have no access to such information because it is part of God's own knowledge. When the very source the soothsayers claim to receive their very special information from declares that it has no such knowledge, then nothing more can be said. All soothsaying and astrology are thus shown to be false. The world beyond belongs to God who alone knows it all. No one can dare claim any special knowledge of it or predict it. The Qur'ān declares that the human mind must remain free of any such delusion. It rids mankind of all such superstitions.

Who or what are those mighty guards? Where do they stand? How do they aim the shooting stars at the devils trying to eavesdrop? Neither the Qur'ān nor the *Ḥadīth* tells us anything of these questions. We do not have any other source to rely on. Had it been useful for us to learn any details of this, God would have given us them. Since He has chosen not to do so, it is futile for us to try anything in this regard. It does not add anything to our lives or to our useful knowledge.

Nor is there any use objecting to this information, or arguing that shooting stars function according to a particular celestial order that remained in operation before and after the Prophet's message, or by adding that astronomers are still trying to explain how this system works. Whatever theories astronomers and scientists come up with, and whether these are correct or not, are outside our discussion here. The system does not preclude that these shooting stars aim at devils as they try to eavesdrop, or that they move in accordance with God's will that gave them their operational system, whether they are meant to hit anyone or not.

Others view all this discussion as figurative, giving us an abstraction of how God preserves His message from being mixed up with falsehood. They maintain that such statements should not be taken at face value. The reason they take this line is that they approach the Qur'ān with preconceived ideas that they acquire from other sources and try to give the Qur'ān an interpretation that fits such preconceptions. Thus, they view the angels as a symbol of goodness and obedience to God, Satan and his group as a symbol of evil and disobedience, and the shooting stars as a symbol of the power of preservation and protection. This is because their notions, which they conceive before they look at the Qur'ān, tell them that neither the angels, devils nor *jinn* could have any physical existence, or take any tangible action, or leave any practical effect. Where do they get all this from? How do they arrive at such preconceptions to which they subject Qur'ānic and *Ḥadīth* statements?

The proper approach to understanding the Qur'ān is to abandon all preconceptions, whether emotional, intellectual or logical, and to formulate our concepts on the basis of the Qur'ān's presentation of the truth about the universe. In other words, the Qur'ān and *Ḥadīth* must be taken only in light of the Qur'ān. We must not try to negate or interpret anything stated in the Qur'ān, or to prove anything the Qur'ān negates or considers invalid. On anything else the Qur'ān neither proves nor negates, we may judge according to logic and experience.

We naturally say this to people who believe in the Qur'ān, yet try to interpret its statements according to their own preconceived ideas of

how things in the universe must be.[4] Those, on the other hand, who do not believe in the Qur'ān, yet arbitrarily try to negate certain facts because science has not proven them, make laughable claims. Science has not yet fathomed the secrets of things that are available to scientists who use them in their research. This lack of knowledge does not negate their existence. Moreover, large numbers of scientists began to believe in the unknown on the same lines as the advocates of religion, or at least these scientists do not deny what they do not know. Pursuing their scientific work, they have found themselves facing some unknowns, when they had thought these to be totally known to man. Hence, they have become humble, unprepared to make wild claims about that which they do not know. They do not disregard the unknown as some of those who deny religion altogether do, claiming that they monopolize scientific thinking.

To Tread the Unknown

The universe around us is full of secrets, spirits and forces. This *sūrah*, like many others, gives us a glimpse of some truths in the universe to help us formulate a proper concept of it and what it contains of forces and lives that carry on around us as also interact with us and with human life in general. This is the concept that distinguishes us, Muslims, putting us in the right position, leaning neither to delusion and superstition, nor to arrogance and insupportable claims. It is a concept based on the Qur'ān and *Ḥadīth*. It is to these two that a Muslim refers all theories and interpretations.

The human mind is given a certain area where man can explore the unknown; indeed Islam directs man to do so, pressurizing him into such action. However, beyond this scope lies a wide area that the human mind cannot access, and to which it does not need such access. It is of

4. I do not absolve myself of falling into this trap in my previous works and in the early volumes of this work. I hope to rectify this in the second edition of this book. What I am stating here is what I believe to be the truth in the light of God's guidance.

Needless to say, the author is here referring to the first Arabic edition of these volumes, which was much shorter and less detailed than the second. This English translation is based on the second edition. – Editor's note.

no use to us in the fulfilment of the task assigned to us, namely, building human life on earth. Hence, man has not been given such access; it is outside of his remit. Whatever he needs to know of this unknown realm in order to understand his own position in relation to the universe and what is around him has been explained to him by God, in terms that he can understand. Aspects of this area that we have been given information about include the angels, the devils, the spirit, our origin and our ultimate destination.

Those who follow divine guidance accept what God has revealed to them of these aspects in His book and through His messengers. They benefit by this feeling of God's majesty and His wisdom with regard to creation. They also learn man's position in relation to such forces and spirits. They dedicate themselves to making whatever scientific discoveries they can manage within the area of the universe made available to man. They utilize their discoveries in the all important task assigned to them, which is building sound human life on the basis of divine guidance, seeking God's acceptance and endeavouring to rise to the sublime level man can achieve.

Others who turn their backs on divine guidance are split into two large groups. One continues to strive, with their own finite minds, to understand the infinite, and to learn the hidden truth from sources other than God's revelations. Among these have been some philosophers who tried to explain the universe and the mutual bonds between its different parts. They made fatal errors, just like children who try to climb a very high mountain with no known summit. They are trying to solve the essential secret of the universe when they have not yet learnt the alphabet! Prominent philosophers among them even arrived at ludicrous concepts. When these are compared to the consistent and lucid concept Islam presents, they appear absurd, full of errors and ironies. They are too naïve to explain the universe, great as it certainly is. I make no exception here in respect of the great Greek philosophers of old, or the Muslim philosophers who toed their line, or of contemporary philosophers.

The other large group recognizes the futility of such attempts and limits itself and its efforts to experimental and applied scientific research. It makes no attempt to penetrate into the unknown, where it knows it cannot go. Scientists in this group refuse to accept God's guidance

on this because they do not recognize God. This group was at its most extreme during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but began in the early years of the twentieth century to wake up and reconsider its extremism. What produced its wake-up call was the transformation of matter in the hands of scientists to radiation, which is of 'unknown nature' and subject to almost unknown law.

By contrast, Islam remained at its vantage point of certainty, giving mankind a measure of the unknown that is good and beneficial for them, allowing them to dedicate themselves to work for the elevation of human life. It gives them the scope in which their minds can work in safety and security. It guides them to what is best in respect of what is known and what remains unknown.

The *Jinn* Community

The *jinn* then describe their own situation and their attitude towards divine guidance. We understand from this that they have a similar nature to mankind, with the dual propensity to either believe or go astray. This group who believed now speak of their faith and what fate awaits the follower of either course:

> *Some among us are righteous and others less so: we follow widely divergent paths. We know that we can never elude God on earth, and we can never elude Him by flight. When we heard the guidance, we came to believe in it. Whoever believes in his Lord need never fear loss or injustice. Some of us submit to Him and others are unfair. Those who submit to God are the ones who have endeavoured to attain what is right. But those who are unfair will be the fuel of hellfire.* (Verses 11–15)

The statement that some of them are righteous and some less so, that some submit to God and others refuse to do so, clearly indicates their dual capacity, except that is for those of them who were determined to be unfair permanently, i.e. Satan and his group. This is a very important statement as it corrects our general perception of these creatures. Many of us, including scholars, tend to think that the *jinn* represent evil, that

their nature is decidedly bad, while man is the only creature capable of good or evil. It is time we corrected this ill-founded idea.

This group of *jinn* says: "*Some among us are righteous and others less so.*" (Verse 11) They describe their general situation: "*We follow widely divergent paths.*" (Verse 11) This means that each group takes a totally different course from the other, and the two paths do not meet. They go on to explain their own beliefs after they have accepted the divine faith: "*We know that we can never elude God on earth, and we can never elude Him by flight.*" (Verse 12) They know God's power. They know they can never escape from Him or what He wills for them. They cannot elude Him on earth nor can they elude Him by running away from earth. They thus acknowledge their weakness before the Creator. They know that everything in the universe is subject to His absolute power.

It is these very creatures, the *jinn*, to whom some humans appeal for support and protection, and who they call upon for help. They are the ones whom the unbelievers claimed to have a marriage relation with God. Yet here they acknowledge their own weakness and God's might. They, thus, correct their own people's and the unbelievers' notion about the only power to which no other can stand.

Although they had already stated their belief, they repeat this here in the context of the *jinn*'s differing attitudes to divine guidance: "*When we heard the guidance, we came to believe in it.*" (Verse 13) This is what everyone who hears divine guidance should do. What they heard was the Qur'ān, but here they call it '*the guidance*', confirming its nature and outcome. They follow this by a statement confirming their absolute trust in God: "*Whoever believes in his Lord need never fear loss or injustice.*" (Verse 13) They have complete trust in God's justice and power. They know the nature of faith. God is fair and He will never fail to give a believer his fair reward. He never burdens him with what he cannot bear. He will protect believers against loss and injustice. Who can inflict loss on a believer or overburden him when he is under God's care, enjoying His protection? Some believers may be deprived of some of life's riches, but this is not what is meant by '*loss*'. Such losses are easily compensated for to ensure fairness. A believer may also suffer harm caused him by some earthly forces, but this is not the '*injustice*' the Qur'ānic verse refers to. God will always give the believer an increase of energy to be able

to tolerate the pain and channel it in a positive way so as to strengthen him. His ties with his Lord will ease the hardship, turning it to what is good for him both in this life and in the life to come.

A believer is thus reassured that he will suffer neither loss nor injustice. This reassurance gives him great confidence throughout times of ease. He is free of worry and fear. When things change and he suffers adversity, he neither panics nor feels overwhelmed. He considers such hardship and misfortune to be a trial God wants him to go through. He bears such adversity with patience. Indeed, he is rewarded for his patience. Furthermore, he hopes that God will relieve this adversity and that again he will be rewarded. Hence, whether the situation be one of ease or adversity, he does not fear or experience either loss or unfairness. This group of *jinn* give a true description of this truth.

The *jinn* now refer to their views about guidance and error and the requital for each: "*Some of us submit to Him and others are unfair. Those who submit to God are the ones who have endeavoured to attain what is right. But those who are unfair will be the fuel of hellfire.*" (Verses 14–15) The *jinn* thus contrast those who are unfair with those who submit themselves to God, or are Muslims. This is a fine touch. A Muslim who submits himself to God is always fair and righteous.

"*Those who submit to God are the ones who have endeavoured to attain what is right.*" (Verse 14) The way this sentence is phrased suggests that to be guided to Islam a person needs to be very careful and meticulous in seeking proper guidance. It also implies a conscious choice of what is right, based on careful study and clear vision. This does not, however, come about by coincidence, or by following the crowd, as it were! It means that these people arrived at what is right when they chose Islam and submitted themselves to God. "*But those who are unfair will be the fuel of hellfire.*" (Verse 15) Their fate is settled. They will become the fuel of hell, and it will rage even more fiercely when they are cast into it.

This confirms that the *jinn* are also punished in hell. It similarly implies that the good among them are destined for heaven. The Qur'ānic text also bears this out and it is from the Qur'ān that we derive our beliefs. No one, then, can say anything that is not based on the Qur'ān, particularly about the nature of the *jinn*, hell and heaven. Whatever else is said in this regard is futile.

What applies to the *jinn*, as they explained it to their people, also applies to humans. They have been informed of this through revelation recited to them by the Prophet.

Different Types of Trial

Up to this point, the *sūrah* has quoted what the *jinn* said about themselves. Now, it summarizes what they said about what God does with those who follow the right course, obeying His commands. In doing so, the Qur'ān reports their ideas without actually quoting their precise words:

> *Had they established themselves on the right way, We would have given them abundant water to drink, so as to test them by this means. Anyone who turns away from his Lord's revelation will be made to endure uphill suffering.* (Verses 16–17)

God Almighty confirms what the *jinn* said to the effect that had people maintained following the right way, or had those who were unfair followed the right way, He would have given them water in plenty, which would have ensured their prosperity. All this would be "*so as to test them by this means.*" (Verse 17) Such a trial establishes whether they are grateful or not.

This change of style, from quoting direct speech to reporting it, enhances the effect because it attributes the message and the promise it gives to God Almighty. Such changes are frequent in the Qur'ān. It reinforces the meaning and draws attention to it.

These two verses include several facts related to Islamic beliefs, how we look at events and how they interrelate. The first of these is the direct relation between following the straight path leading to God, by nations and communities, and their enjoying prosperity and provisions in plenty. The most essential requirement of such prosperity is abundant water. All life depends on water. This is true even in our own times when industry has acquired much greater importance, and agriculture is no longer the only source of plentiful provisions and prosperity. Water still remains as important as ever for a flourishing civilization.

That prosperity and security depend on following the right way and maintaining it with resolve is certainly true. The Arabs were desert people living in total poverty. When they followed the right way with strong resolve, the world opened up to them providing plentiful water and provisions. Then they deviated from that way, and all the good things in life were taken away from them. They will continue to live a life of stress and poverty until they regain the right way and follow it.[5] Only then will God's promise be fulfilled to them.

There are certainly communities that turn away from the line God wants people to follow in this life, yet they enjoy affluence. However, when we look at the life they lead we find that they suffer from other ills that detract from their humanity, security or man's dignity and freedom. Thus their riches do not provide them with real prosperity. On the contrary, life in such societies becomes a curse for man depriving him of dignity, security and proper morality.

The second fact that the verses above establish is that prosperity is a means of trial God sets for His creatures: "*We test you all with evil and good by way of trial.*" (21: 35) Indeed, maintaining the right way in times of plenty and prosperity, giving due thanks for God's favours and using them for good purposes is, contrary to what appears at first sight, more difficult than patience in adversity. Many are those who show courage and perseverance when things go against them. They rally and put in sustained efforts to overcome such adversity. They more readily remember God, pray to Him and seek His help, realizing that only He can bring them through their troubles. When people are prosperous, enjoying a life of plenty, however, they tend to forget God and be distracted. The element of resistance is no longer needed. There is every opportunity for arrogance, treating God's blessings as merited dues. This then opens the way for Satan and his machinations.

A trial with prosperity requires constant alertness to resist such temptation, because the blessings of affluence often lead to transgression,

5. It may be suggested that oil has given Arabs, or many of them at least, wealth and comfortable living. Oil provides only temporary means of affluence. Besides, it brought the Arabs much stress and misery, with the mighty powers of the world imposing a state of almost total powerlessness on Arab countries. Today, for the Arabs to regain control of their own destiny seems an extremely remote possibility for most educated Arabs. – Editor's note.

ingratitude, arrogance, injustice, depriving other people of their rights and also disrespecting sanctities. God may favour some people with beauty, but this blessing often leads to arrogance and sin. He may give them intelligence, yet again this blessing may lead to conceit, disrespect of others and disregard for values and standards. Almost every blessing and favour God grants us involves some temptation that takes the person away from the right path. Only those who always remember God and, who as a result, enjoy His protection are excepted.

When a trial of prosperity leads to moving away from God's path, this makes God's punishment inevitable. The Qur'ānic verse mentions a particular quality of such punishment: "*Anyone who turns away from his Lord's revelation will be made to endure uphill suffering.*" (Verse 17) This gives a sense of increased difficulty, because whoever goes uphill finds the going harder as he climbs higher. The Qur'ān often refers to such hardship as going uphill. Other examples include: "*Whomever God wills to guide, He makes his bosom open wide with willingness towards self-surrender (to Him); and whomever He wills to let go astray, He causes his bosom to be tight and constricted, as if he were climbing up into the skies.*" (6: 125) "*I will constrain him to endure a painful uphill climb.*" (74: 17) This is a well-known fact. The contrast between a trial of affluence and hard punishment in requital is, thus, abundantly clear.

None Other Than God

The next verse may represent another quotation from the *jinn*, or it may be a direct statement made by God:

> *Places of worship are for God alone; therefore, do not invoke anyone other than God.* (Verse 18)

In both cases it makes clear that worship, and places of worship, which is expressed in the Arabic text in the form of prostration, must be devoted to God alone. That is where God's oneness is strictly observed, leaving no room whatsoever for anyone else, be that a person, a value or an idea. The whole atmosphere must be dedicated to the pure worship of God alone. Invoking someone other than God may take the form of

worshipping that someone, appealing to him, or even directing one's thoughts and feelings towards him instead of God.

If we take the verse to be a statement made by the *jinn*, it serves as a reconfirmation of their earlier pledge: "*We shall never associate partners with our Lord.*" (Verse 2) This is repeated at the mention of places of worship and prostration before God. If we take it as a statement by God, it serves as a directive that fits with what the *jinn* said about their belief in God's oneness. The same applies to the verse that follows:

> *Yet when God's servant stood up to pray to Him, they pressed in on him in multitude.* (Verse 19)

The verse describes how the unbelievers pressed upon this servant of God when he stood to invoke and pray to Him. If we treat this verse as quoting the *jinn*'s statement, then they are telling us about what the Arab unbelievers did when they gathered in groups around the Prophet as he stood up to pray or as he recited the Qur'ān. This is referred to in an earlier *sūrah* in this volume: "*What is wrong with the unbelievers, that they run confusedly before you, from the right and the left, in crowds?*" (70: 36–37) They listen with amazement, yet they do not respond. Alternatively, the expression, '*they pressed on him in multitude,*' means that they tried to inflict harm on him but God protected him, as repeatedly happened. In this case, the *jinn* are reporting this event to their people, describing how singular the Arab unbelievers' attitude was.

If we take the verse as a statement made by God, then it tells us about this group of *jinn*'s reaction when they listened to the Qur'ān. They were totally amazed, pressing on the Prophet, close to each other. This is perhaps more probable as it fits with the feelings of surprise, amazement and alarm that are clearly apparent in the *jinn*'s account.

Both *Jinn* and Human

Having completed its account of what the *jinn* said about the Qur'ān, and their total amazement at its discourse, the *sūrah* now addresses the Prophet in a decisive tone, requiring him to deliver his message and to make it clear that once he has done so, he has no say in what happens

afterwards. He is to make clear that he has no knowledge whatsoever of the world beyond, or of how people fare. This address carries an overtone of sorrow and sadness that particularly suits its seriousness and decisive manner:

> *Say: 'I invoke my Lord alone, and I associate no partners with Him.' Say: 'It is not in my power to cause you harm or to set you on the right course.' Say: 'No one can ever protect me from God, nor can I ever find a place to hide from Him. My task is only to deliver what I receive from God and His messages.' Whoever disobeys God and His Messenger will have the fire of hell, where they will abide for ever. When they see what they have been promised, they will realize who has the lesser help and is smaller in number. Say: 'I do not know whether that which you have been promised is imminent, or whether my Lord has set for it a distant term. He alone knows that which is beyond the reach of human perception, and He does not disclose His secrets to anyone except to a messenger whom He has been pleased to choose. He then sends watchers to walk before and behind him, to know that they have delivered their Lord's messages. He has full knowledge of all they have. He takes count of everything.'* (Verses 20–28)

You, Muḥammad! Say it to all people: "*I invoke my Lord alone, and I associate no partners with Him.*" (Verse 20) Coming after the *jinn*'s statement, "*We shall never associate partners with our Lord,*" this declaration acquires special effect. It is the same words, declared by *jinn* and humans. These unbelievers who do not share in it break away from all worlds.

No Help from Anyone

"*Say: It is not in my power to cause you harm or to set you on the right course.*" (Verse 21) The Prophet is commanded to disclaim any of God's qualities and attributes. It is God alone who must be worshipped, without partners, and He alone who can cause harm and bring benefit. The verse contrasts harm with being '*on the right course,*' which means following divine guidance. This was clearly expressed by the *jinn* earlier:

"*We do not know if this bodes evil for those who live on earth, or if their Lord intends to guide them to what is right.*" (Verse 10) Thus, the two statements have the same drift and are almost identical in their wording. This is deliberate. It is also a frequently used structure in the Qur'ān where we always see such complementarity between a story and the Qur'ānic comments on events.

Thus the *jinn*, who are often thought to be able to cause harm and bring about benefit, and the Prophet disclaim any such ability. It all belongs to God alone. The divine faith makes this absolutely clear, with no possibility for confusion.

"*Say: No one can ever protect me from God, nor can I ever find a place to hide from Him. My task is only to deliver what I receive from God and His messages.*" (Verses 22–23) This is indeed frightening. It fills our hearts with the seriousness of advocating the divine message. The Prophet is commanded to declare this great truth stating that he himself has neither protection nor hiding place unless he discharges his task, fulfils his trust and delivers his message. This is his only safe resort. The message itself does not belong to him; his only task is to deliver it, which he must fulfil. It is required of him by God Himself, and unless he meets this requirement, he will have nowhere to go and no help from anyone.

How serious! How frightening! Advocating God's message is not something one volunteers to do; it is a serious assignment that must be fulfilled, because it is given by God Almighty. Its motive is not the pleasure one finds in presenting guidance and goodness to people; it is a command given from on high which cannot be shirked. Nor can one show any hesitation in the matter.

"*Whoever disobeys God and His Messenger will have the fire of hell, where they will abide for ever. When they see what they have been promised, they will realize who has the lesser help and is smaller in number.*" (Verses 23–24) There is a warning here, both implicit and explicit, given to everyone who receives this order and disobeys it. If the unbelievers are content with their power and numbers, comparing their strength to that of Muḥammad and his few followers, they will come to know when they see what they have been promised, either in this life or in the life to come, which of the two parties is weaker and will end up the loser. Again, we note how this comment echoes the earlier one made by the

jinn: "*We do not know if this bodes evil for those who live on earth, or if their Lord intends to guide them to what is right.*" (Verse 10)

Limited Knowledge

The Prophet is also commanded to disclaim any knowledge of the world beyond human perception: "*Say: I do not know whether that which you have been promised is imminent, or whether my Lord has set for it a distant term.*" (Verse 25)

In summary, then, this message does not belong to the Prophet; he has no say in it other than to deliver it as he is commanded. Only this will bring him safety. Likewise, the punishment the unbelievers are threatened with also belongs to God and the Prophet has no say in it, nor does he know when it will take place. It may be close at hand or it may be deferred by God to a time of His own choosing. This applies to punishment both in this life and in the life to come. All this is known only to God. The Prophet has no say here whatsoever, not even knowing its timing. It is to God that such knowledge of the world beyond belongs: "*He alone knows that which is beyond the reach of human perception, and He does not disclose His secrets to anyone.*" (Verse 26) The Prophet has neither title nor position, other than that of being God's servant. This is his title and his highest position. The Islamic concept is thus stated in all clarity, free of any confusion. The Prophet is given the order to state his position and he does so without hesitation: "*Say: I do not know whether that which you have been promised is imminent, or whether my Lord has set for it a distant term. He alone knows that which is beyond the reach of human perception, and He does not disclose His secrets to anyone.*" (Verses 25–26)

There is only one exception. God may inform His messengers of something that belongs to this world beyond, within the limits that help them to deliver His message to people. Indeed, all that He reveals to them is part of His knowledge which He imparts to them at a certain point in time and within certain limits. He observes them and looks after them as they deliver His messages. The Prophet is commanded here to declare this exception in a very serious way: "*except to a messenger whom He has been pleased to choose. He then sends watchers to walk before and behind him, to know that they have delivered their Lord's messages. He*

has full knowledge of all they have. He takes count of everything." (Verses 27–28) Those messengers whom God chooses to deliver His message are given some information that belongs to the world beyond human perception. They are, for example, given revelation, its subject matter, method, the angels imparting it, its source and its preservation in the guarded tablet, as well as all that is related to what their messages contain. Prior to giving them such information, it was all there, in the realm that lies beyond human perception.

At the same time, these messengers are surrounded by watchers and guards to protect them. They protect them from Satan's whispers and attempts to derail their efforts, from personal promptings and aspirations, from human weaknesses, forgetfulness, deviation and all other shortcomings that may affect a messenger and disrupt his work. The notion is also a frightening one, "*He then sends watchers to walk before and behind him.*" (Verse 27) This describes the careful, complete and permanent monitoring of the messenger as he goes about his great task, delivering his message. This monitoring has a purpose: "*to know that they have delivered their Lord's messages.*" (Verse 28) God certainly knows this. What is meant here is that the messengers fulfil their assignments and that this brings about their fulfilment in the practical world.

"*He has full knowledge of all they have.*" (Verse 28) Everything in their hearts and lives, everything around them is known to Him; nothing escapes. "*He takes count of everything.*" (Verse 28) This is not though limited to just the messengers; it applies to all things: they are all counted up, which signifies the most accurate type of knowledge.

Just imagine this situation: God's Messenger is surrounded by guards and watchers, with God's knowledge already having counted all he has and all that is around him. He receives the command as a soldier who has no option but to comply. He goes about his task but he is not left to himself, to suffer from his own weaknesses or desires. What he likes or dislikes is not allowed to affect him. The whole matter is one of complete seriousness and careful monitoring. He knows all this and moves along his way, turning neither here nor there, because he knows that he is constantly watched by the most alert of guards. It is a situation that draws much sympathy for God's Messenger. It also fills us with awe when we consider the seriousness of it all.

This very awesome note brings the *sūrah* to its conclusion. It began with a feeling of awe and amazement that is clearly noticeable in the long discourse about the *jinn*. In no more than 28 verses, the *sūrah* outlines a large number of truths that are part of the Islamic faith. They are essential in the formulation of the clear and balanced vision a Muslim must have, leaning towards no extreme. It keeps all doors to knowledge open, leaving no room for delusion or superstition.

Especially true is the statement delivered by the group of *jinn* that listened to the Qur'ān: "*We have heard a wondrous discourse, giving guidance to what is sagacious, and we have come to believe in it.*" (Verses 1–2)